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ARTHUR SCHNITZLER

BY ARCHIBALD HENDERSON

To this country, in which the giant of drama first now in our history evidences unmistakable signs of awakening to self-consciousness and activity, the quindecennial anniversary of the birth of Arthur Schnitzler demands recognition which should be none the less adequate that it is belated. Contemporary preoccupation with the most pronounced forms of the social drama, of intention and of propaganda, has cast a sort of blinding glare across the stage of our time. The clamant individualism of Ibsen, the explicit purposiveness of Brioux, the sociological passion of Shaw, have shadowed the less assertive, but often more exquisitely fashioned, works of the dexterous Austrian dramatist, Arthur Schnitzler.

The art of this delicate craftsman, who on May 15th of the present year celebrated his fiftieth birthday, is eminently worthy of emulation at the hands of the coming dramatists of America. His plays, in adequate translation, deserve the considerate attention of that widening circle of temperate enthusiasts in our country now dedicating themselves to the study and intelligent propagation of popular interest in the highest manifestations of the dramatic art of our time. At infrequent intervals American audiences have participated in the esthetic privileges vouchsafed by his delicate workmanship and polished art—the tender, tragic beauty of “*Light o’ Love*,” the magic impressionism of “*The Green Cockatoo*,” the ultra-modern satire of “*Literature*.” Scattered here and there, in the English and American magazines, may be read translations of a few of Schnitzler’s one-act plays and three-act dramas—“*The Wife*,” “*The Woman with the Dagger*,” “*Living Hours*,” “*The Duke and the Actress*,” “*The Legacy*,” and “*Light o’ Love*.” So far, however, excepting one or two allusive sketches, we have had

no account in English of the dramatic work, a noble and honorable work, of one who stands in the forefront of those who have given to the German drama of to-day its distinction and pre-eminence. The time is indeed ripe for interpretative appreciation of the high and difficult art of Austria's leading dramatist, Arthur Schnitzler.

To understand Schnitzler one must realize that he functions primarily for a metropolis that vies with Paris itself in love for the theater and for the ultimate refinements of literature—Ibsen's "beloved Vienna." It is the custom for the north Germans to hold in light regard the spirit and temperament of the Viennese. The high polish of surfaces, the brilliance of artificiality, artistic sensitiveness without intellectual content—such are the terms of this depreciation. It is the distinction of Schoenherr, of Von Hofmannsthal, and, above all, of Schnitzler, to have silenced this depreciation and once again to have given to Vienna that artistic eminence achieved by Grillparzer, Raimund, Bauernfeld, and Halm. Yet it is not the primitive, virile strength of "Faith and Fireside," but the Watteau-like airiness of "Der Rosenkavalier" and the half-gay, half-sad nuances of "Anatol" which reflect for us the characteristic Viennese note of to-day.

Schnitzler writes for an enlightened public, enamoured of the theater for the theater's sake, sophisticated in life as well as in art, ever exigent in its ideals of literature. In contradistinction to the authentic German spirit, ceaselessly intent upon searching out the heart of life's mystery and revealing, in human will, man's divine potentiality, the authentic Austrian spirit delights to invest human life with the grace and charm of poetry. About every-day happenings it loves to throw the iridescent halo of the ideal; to impregnate the life of *tous les jours* with the fragrance of happy memories and glad anticipation. Through the symphony runs a strain of melancholy, pronounced yet restrained—a sense of life's transitory and evanishing happiness. In a word, the Viennese spirit, as reflected so subtly by Schnitzler, is best caught in its search for that "high, painful happiness" for which the later Ibsen sighed with such mournful regret when he came to meet the little Viennese, Emilie Bardach. Romance shot through with melancholy, happiness tinged with regret—for this spirit Schnitzler has chosen the fit artistic medium, romantic im-

pressionism. He reflects life as he sees it in a mood of gay romance; but each little feature, each implicative allusion reflects a depth of sadness and a capacity for tragedy. It is this spirit of melancholy reflection, sometimes verging upon an almost cynical criticism of life, which lifts Schnitzler's dramas out of the domain of mere literature into the domain of profound emotion and social pity.

Arthur Schnitzler merits our study because there is not simply one, but two sides to his genius—the first distinctly Viennese, the second pre-eminently human. It is important for us to know that Schnitzler's father was a doctor, a famous laryngologist. Schnitzler himself is a doctor of medicine, having taken his degree in 1885; from 1886 to 1888 he saw active hospital service, and since 1888 has enjoyed an extensive private practice in Vienna. His clinical studies, his minute examination of nervous affections, his preoccupation as physician with sexual manifestations and human dissolution—all are found reflected in his works. The cynicism with which he is often credited, as in the case of Shaw, proceeds not from a distrust in human nature, but from an extraordinarily astute perception of its frailties—the legacy of all physicians of the human body. When, as in the case of Schnitzler, accurate knowledge of pathological symptoms is reinforced by psychological insight of a very high order, it is inevitable that his works should reveal at times less sympathy for human frailty than a sort of lightness in the treatment of human suffering which occasionally seems little short of callousness.

The Schnitzler made famous throughout the world by his "Anatol" is an artist in the portrayal of twilight moods and erotic nuances. In the society which he presents there is no question of the obtrusion of moral: the double standard is accepted as an inevitable phase of this sophisticated civilization. For these sad, gay dogs of the Viennese pack flirtation is a pastime and philandering a high art. Atmosphere and Temperament—these are the two key words in the mystery of Schnitzler's charm. These light-hearted philanderers, sipping fragrance from many a wayside flower, are lacking in force, in passion, in will. Their assets are a certain childish gaiety and naïve charm, an almost feminine petulance, a tinge of nervous hysteria. Their code is tact—avoidance of the banal and the vulgar in manners and deportment. These are little *genre* pictures he

gives us, fantasias on the eternal theme, "Off with the old love, on with the new." It is student love carried one step further—Murger's "*La Vie Bohème*" dramatized piecemeal. The frail young things, reminiscent of that persistent type of Greuze, simple, sensuous, larmoyant, clinging, ever come and go—now with all the fabled "strength of the weak," now palled with the saccharine monotony, now deftly, dexterously snapping the tenuous bonds of lawless union. Each partner follows the law of his own or her own nature—which means the line of least resistance. Romance gilds the scene—there is the perfume of flowers, the sparkle of champagne. The crisis comes—parting is inevitable; but there shall be no harsh words, no crude recriminations, most of all, no regrets. The woman may protest, cry out, burst into tears—but man, god-like, must be Olympian in his calm! Yet the hero, who acts like a gentleman when he is at bottom only a cad, is not always immune, for sometimes Fate packs the cards against him and leaves him sheepishly contemplating the ruins of his artistically constructed self-respect.

In "Abschieds Souper," so delightfully played by Charlotte Wiehe, Anatol, who has ruined his digestion eating two suppers every night, one with Anna, the other with the new *innamorata*, gracefully plans to break the news to Anna at a little supper for Max, Anna, and himself; but is hoist by his own petard, to Max's uncontrollable mirth, when Anna informs him that a new love has come into *her* life also. There is real tenderness in "A Christmas Present" when Gabrielle, the "high-born lady" who dared not give Anatol what some nameless fair vouchsafes with ready hand, sends her a nosegay with the message: "These flowers, dear little girl, are from some one who might have been as happy as you—if she hadn't been quite such a coward!" The tragic sadness of such episodes lurks in "Question to Fate," when Anatol decides to hypnotize Cora and resolve his doubts in her answer to his unspoken thought: "Does she love me and me only?" But when the revelative moment comes and Max has withdrawn, Anatol tries to ask the question—but finds that he dare not put his fate to the touch. He recalls Max and assures him of his perfect content over Cora's reply. But his disquiet is far from being allayed when the awakened Cora exhibits an uneasy curiosity as to the catechism.

There is something at once brutal and burlesque, more Berlinese than Viennese, in the three "one-acters"—"Der Puppenspieler,"* "Der Tapfere Cassian,"† and the comic *revue* "Zum Grossen Wurstel."‡ The most satirical and effective of all Schnitzler's farces is "Literatur." A woman still attractive but no longer quite young is about to marry a baron, a banker, who is jealous of her passion for letters. She is all but ready to make the great sacrifice, but longs to see just one more novel of hers through the press. It is a real "human document"—for she has woven together the letters long ago received from a former lover into a passionate romance. The betrothed remains ignorant of all this and even of the contents of the book. Pitiable indeed is the lady's plight when she is visited by her former correspondent, the hero of the impending novel, who informs her that he too has kept her letters to him and made a novel of them. Each exactly supplements the other—discovery is inevitable. Before each has recovered from the horror of the other's confidence the betrothed returns, intent upon putting his fiancée to a supreme test. He has bought up the whole edition of her novel before its publication and will withdraw it from circulation—with her permission? His delight is supreme when she consents. One copy only he has reserved—to read with her in the intimacy of the fireside. "My own," rapturously exclaims this ready-witted lady, "my sacrifice shall be complete," and then flings the incriminating copy into the fire. Her former lover, heaving a deep sigh of relief, slinks out, while the lady sinks into the baron's arms.

It is Schnitzler's peculiar gift to exhibit delicacy in treatment of the indelicate, refinement in portrayal of the unrefined. The most unashamed exposure of the mechanics of eroticism, however, is found in Schnitzler's "Reigen," a series of ten dialogues written in 1906–07. It is a piece of frank naturalism, a vicious circle of adultery written by a physician who, after Kipling, finds "the Colonel's lady and Biddy O'Grady sisters under the skin." It is the last word in cold-blooded suggestiveness, this cycle of dialogues: a prostitute and a soldier; the soldier and a chambermaid; the chambermaid and a young gentleman; the young gentle-

* First produced at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, in 1903.

† First produced at the Kleines Theater, Berlin, in 1904.

‡ First produced at the Lustspiel Theater, Vienna, in 1906.

man and a young married woman; the young married woman and her husband; the husband and a young girl; the young girl and a poet; the poet and an actress; the actress and a count; and lastly the count and the prostitute of the first dialogue. Each dialogue ends in the identical episode of passion, and justifies the assertion that Schnitzler's eroticism is "far more insidious than the brutalities of Wedekind."

In certain respects, Schnitzler's most polished work is found in his one-act pieces, dealing not with erotic themes—though a liaison always lurks somewhere in the background—but with experiences and episodes of human life carrying with them the lessons of sorrow, experience, old age, and dissolution. They are the pieces in which Schnitzler, the philosopher and the psychologist, not the surgeon, deals not with love, but with life and death. The most human expression of this phase of Schnitzler's art is found in "Paracelsus," an imaginary episode from the life of the great magician. Much of Schnitzler's philosophy is latent in this fine poem: "Life is a game—who knows it is wise."

The strange complications of emotion, evoked by the liaison which is tactfully concealed but tacitly understood, are admirably disentangled in "Die Gefaehrtin." The wasted nobility of feeling of Robert Pilgram upon a wife who asked nothing more of life than a liaison with his assistant, Alfred, the while knowing that Alfred is not true to her even in this relation—such faith unfaithful, such sordid falsity, are only revealed in her death and the announcement of Alfred's engagement—a complex study wrought out with the most dexterous simplicity. "The Green Cockatoo" is the most dramatic piece, theatrical in the original sense, that Schnitzler has ever composed. It is the eve of the storming of the Bastille; and pleasure-worn nobles and their consorts sit in a brothel in the most crime-infested corner of Paris looking on at a species of crude *revue* extemporized for their entertainment. This tiny brothel, with its band of mumming criminals, is a microcosm. We are, momentarily, in doubt if it is all jest or earnest, masquerade or reality. Thus is mirrored the confusion and mad unreality of this hour in France's history. The Apache burlesque swings into a clamant finale—the threatened murder in the comedy within the comedy, of the noble by the *bourgeois*, suddenly transpires before our very eyes. The Revolution is on at last.

"Lebendige Stunden," gray tale with stern contrasts of ambition and sacrifice, literature and life, reminds of the slow-flowing current of age in Ibsen's "John Gabriel Borkman"—without its genius. "The Woman with the Dagger" seems to me to be little more than a startling experiment in technique. There is no real inevitableness of Fate's decision in the coolly calculated assignation of its finale. The most effective bit of naturalism that Schnitzler the impressionist has rescued from the purloins of his profession is "Die Letzten Masken." It is interesting as a piece of pure psychology. Rademacher, the dying writer, a pitiable failure as a man of letters, sends for the famous, the admired author, Weihgast—to wreak a life's revenge. Rademacher wants to deal him a mortal blow, in the revelation that, after all, the successful author has been a miserable failure—since his wife has really belonged to Rademacher. He even rehearses the revelation with a friend, an actor, who is a fellow-inmate of the hospital. When the moment arrives Rademacher discovers that in reality Weihgast is the most unhappy of men, his art a bitter curse. Faith in wife and home alone are left him. So Rademacher foregoes his melodramatic revenge, morbidly content in its imaginative rehearsal—and dies without malice and without regret.

The most thoroughly charming of all Schnitzler's plays, especially because it leaves no bitter after-taste, is "Komtesse Mizzi." The story is told with all the finished charm of an artist-magician in whose make-up there is much of feminine finesse and intuition. Schnitzler has no moral purpose, no intention here save the intent of the artist to paint a graceful picture with comic lights, clear middle distance, and the shadows of sweet and haunting melancholy. As Percival Pollard once said: "Our good physician knows his Austria better than we do; he is content to heal its body and dissect its soul; he knows better than to try more than that."

The real heroine of Schnitzler's dramas, truth to tell, is "*das süsse Mädel*"—a term invented by Hartleben, but a type perfected by Schnitzler himself. She is the "dear girl," comically embodied in America in the figure of the business man's typist, inhabiting that twilight zone between respectable domesticity and the half-world. Anatol says somewhere: "She's like a waltz—sentimental gaiety—smiling, mischievous melancholy. Peace and content stream from

her to you—if you take her a bunch of violets a tear-drop glistens in the corner of her eye.” As “Anatol” is the comedy of “*das süsse Mädel*,” so “Das Märchen,” “Das Vermächtniss,” and “Liebeleï” are her tragedy. In this gay Viennese existence, “imperfectly monogamous,” as Howells has happily phrased it, there is always a place for this “*kleines süßes, blondes Köpferl*”—so long as the lover remains faithful, is not mocked by the thought of her past, or does not die. In “Das Märchen,” a badly executed, sprawling play with a host of superfluous characters, Fedor Denner boldly announces in the first act: “I am not speaking of the woman who sells herself or throws herself away—but what right have we to outlaw every one who has had the courage to love some one before *we* happened to come on the scene?” Yet in the stern test of experience Fedor so tortures himself over the story of little Fanny’s early indiscretion, is so obsessed with the consciousness of it, that he finally insults her irrevocably and abandons her to recklessness and despair.

In “Das Vermächtniss” the young Hugo, thrown from his horse and fatally injured, lives just long enough to secure the promise that Toni and their four-year-old son Franzl shall be welcomed in the home and protected by his family. All goes well until the sudden death of little Franzl—the one vital link between the lamented son and the bereaved parents. They now inform the friendless, sweet-natured Toni that they will provide for her elsewhere. But she escapes life’s heartlessness in the “cool, enfolding arms of death.”

“Liebeleï” is the real tragedy of the Schnitzler heroine. Theodor tries to rescue Fritz from a dangerous affair with a married woman, an aristocrat, by means of an association we may euphemistically denominate flirtation (“Liebeleï”) with a “dear girl” of the people. Christine, living alone with her aged father—who as he says “has protected her from all dangers—and from all happiness!”—makes a hero of Fritz and gives herself to him utterly. When Christine learns that Fritz, for the sake of this other woman, has been killed in a duel with the outraged husband and has actually been buried without her knowledge, a realization of her true position first flashes in upon her stricken consciousness. The quintessence of the tragedy of her type is expressed in her anguished cry, “What then am I?” Her flight into

a night of desolation and despair, never to return we foresee, is the inevitably tragic solution of a social riddle that mocks the thought of our time.

Schnitzler's most subtle and highly complex study of souls is found in "*Zwischenspiel*," a study of the quadrangle beside which the vaunted problems of the triangle seem simplicity itself. Victor Amadeus, pianist, and his wife Cecilie, singer, enter into a thoroughly modern matrimonial compact—each to leave the other perfect amatory freedom. There remains no happiness for this sophisticated pair of reunited philanderers—after their liaisons begin to pall. The dilemma is a stroke of the finest art of the theater—Cecilie unable to trust Victor's constancy and incapable of confidence in the fidelity of her own instincts for the future. They part, still loving each other, yet mutually estranged—a shrewd vindication, this, of the conventional standards of marriage, a satire on the erotic vagaries of ultra-modernity.

Essentially Schnitzler is a dramatist whose genius flames into greater intensity the more circumscribed the area within which he works. Of his two dramas in the "grand manner" neither quite "comes off"—the motives become entangled, the threads of the narrative cross one another in confusing complication. "*Der Schleier der Beatrice*," unfolding the reckless abandon and passion of the Renaissance, little overtops Wilde's "*The Duchess of Padua*"—the lesson of the "world well lost for lust" palls nowadays. So, too, "*Der Junge Medardus*," the sensation of the Hofburg Theater in 1910-11, is overloaded with parts, characters, events, motives, words—through over-employment of means Schnitzler has defeated his end: to vitalize that strange conflict in which the conspirator, lured into the snare of personal fascination, dementedly gives the death blow to his own larger purpose and, quixotic, dies the victim of his own perversity. "*Freiwild*," clever as it is in its veiled polemics; "*Der Ruf des Lebens*," with its mixed morals and strained psychology; "*Das Weite Land*," of defeated promise, already produced at numerous theaters throughout Germany and Austria—all really contribute nothing to the larger meaning of Schnitzler and his place in the theater of to-day. Even if, in these plays, the craftsman devises individual acts and scenes full of magnetic force and electric thrill, in which plot is always subsidiary to atmosphere, the total effect is wavering and inconclusive.

The deeper element in Schnitzler's work which has won me, despite the shocking erotics of "Reigen," the graceful lewdness of "Anatol," the satirical contempt of "Literatur," is his sincere, affecting sympathy for the tragedy of the frail young creatures so irresistibly projected, so inevitably embodied, in "The Fairy Tale," "The Legacy," and "Light o' Love." These are the three plays that justify Schnitzler's title of world-dramatist and align him with the serious social dramatists of our age, headed by Ibsen, Björnson, Hauptmann, Sudermann, Shaw, and Brioux. In a sense, his whole dramatic contribution resolves itself into a study of the erotic emotions of sex, and the temperamental reactions therefrom of the male and the female of the species. Now with the lightest of strokes, he delineates the comedy of disenchantment, the farce of disentanglement. Now with the precision of the master impressionist, without sympathy but without cynicism, he paints the disillusionments of the life of passion, when men and women fling aside ties fancied irksome for the illicit enticements of the "joy of life." But in his deeper moods, in the pathos of "Freiwild," that sardonic satire on the *code duello*, the finely conceived struggle of his long novel, *Der Weg ins Freie*, as well as in the three dramas mentioned above, he reveals the deep seriousness of the great artist, not the mere dilettante of literature. Here are real social problems vital to our own day and vital in the civilization of the future. The problem faced by Jane Addams at Hull House is the problem sympathetically presented, under various guises, by Schnitzler in his dramas. The double standard of morals is to-day legally sanctioned for men only. The force of public opinion, speciously masking its appetites under a pretense of an alarmed concern for the sanctity and integrity of the family, upholds the man in the illicit gratification of his instincts. The same freedom is denied to woman, with a Puritanical fervor instinct with the acme of hypocrisy. And yet when society is called upon to face the consequences of its ethical standards—privilege for the male, self-repression for the female—it has nothing but the scourge of contempt, abhorrence, and social ostracism, leading to tragedy, prostitution, and death for the woman who suffers the consequence of man's "legitimatized" sex passion. In painting the picture in the vivid colors of real life, in showing the tragedy of the woman and the inhumanity of

society, without maudlin sentimentality and without crass hysteria, Schnitzler has dedicated his art to the reorganization of public opinion. He deserves well of a generation he has thus sought to purify and ennoble.

Schnitzler is, fundamentally, a dramatist who celebrates the "moment and the moment's monument." He functions most effectively in the one-act play, fittest *locale* for mood, temperament, and atmosphere. In the intricacies of the three-act drama Schnitzler has also been successful in finding himself. Beyond that limit he loses both his audience and himself in the vagueness of over-elaboration and the confusion of hyper-complication. His art is impressionistic and delicate—instinct with feminine grace and intuition, slightly satirical, softly melancholy. It is Vienna crossed with Paris, Wilde fortified with Ibsen. No other dramatist, it has been aptly said, has written tragedy with so light a hand or comedy with so ironically pathetic a smile.

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